

HSE annual statistics 2019 – 2020

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Summary

At a time when the health of the nation generally is at the forefront of people's minds, we look at how safe workplaces have been in recent years and what we can expect in the future, following the recent publication of the HSE's 'Health and Safety at Work – summary statistics for Great Britain 2020'. This covers ill health, injury, disease and regulatory enforcement activity in 2019/2020 and is drawn from a number of sources including RIDDOR submissions, the Labour Force Survey and HSE Costs to Britain Model. The headline statistics suggest a significant prevalence of work-related injuries and illness in this country:

- **111 fatal injuries** to workers in 2019/2020;
- **693,000 workers suffering non-fatal (self-reported) injuries** (up from 581,000)
- **65,427 non-fatal injuries** to workers reported by employers in 2019/2020;
- **1.6 million work-related ill health cases** (new and longstanding) in 2019/2020 (up from 1.4million), together with 828,000 work-related stress cases and 480,000 work-related musculoskeletal disorders;
- **12,000 lung disease deaths** per annum estimated to be linked to previous work exposures;
- **38.8 million working days lost** due to work-related ill health and non-fatal injuries (up from 28.2million the previous year);

As well as the human suffering involved, all of this comes at a heavy price to the British economy, with the latest survey estimating an annual cost of £16.2 billion for work-related injury and ill health (up from £15 billion). This can be broken down into costs of £10.6 billion for work-related ill health (up from £9.8 billion) and £5.6 billion for the annual cost of workplace injury, an increase from £5.2 billion the previous year. These latest figures give rise to a number of unexpected concerns.

Workplace injury

The number of non-fatal RIDDOR-reported injuries has continued to fall this year, at 65,427 (down from 69,208 last year and 71,062 the previous year). Alongside the reduction in fatalities (from 147 to 111), this is a welcome trend, although it may be a symptom of the changes to RIDDOR made earlier in the past decade and a sign of a changing employment structure in the country.

Against a profile of falling estimates over the past 20 years, the number of self-reported workplace non-fatal injuries per 100,000 workers has increased for the second time in a row. 693,000 workers compared to 581,000 workers last year and 555,000 in 2017/2018 is a worrying trend. This may suggest either more (albeit less serious) incidents occurring in the workplace in recent times or employees being increasingly encouraged to report them. It is hard to escape the conclusion, however, that the increase in combined RIDDOR and self-reported injuries from 2018/2019 to 2019/2020 (650,208 to 758,427) suggests more incidents and therefore reduced rates of success in respect of health and safety in work over the past year or so. Combined with the sharp increase in estimated working days lost due to non-fatal, self-reported injuries of 6.3 million compared to 4.7 million last year and 3.9 million the year before that, and the consequent increases in the cost to the country, these are worrying signs.

Slips, trips or falls on the same level continue to make up the majority of such injuries (29%), followed by manual handling incidents (19%), strike by moving objects (11%), acts of violence (9%) and falls from height (8%). All the figures are broadly similar to the previous year albeit with a slight rise in strikes and a slight reduction in manual handling as overall percentages. Whilst only slight, the acts of violence have increased 1% each year for the past couple of years. Whilst this is a trend we would not wish to see continue, the increases are marginal and do not suggest that workplaces are becoming significantly more violent places.

HSE enforcement

It is evident from the 2020 Summary Statistics and the HSE Annual Report 2019/20 that there has been a significant decrease in HSE prosecutions over the last few years.

In 2015/16 the HSE and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (in Scotland) prosecuted 682 cases. Four years later, the figures for 2019/20 show a 50 percent reduction in the number of prosecutions, with a total of only 325 prosecutions resulting in a conviction.

In terms of the potential explanation for the significant decrease in the level of health and safety prosecution activity, the HSE has in the past referenced a larger than usual number of inspectors in training and increased time spent dealing with the Sentencing Guideline which was introduced in 2016. The HSE is also dedicating hefty resources to undertaking a considerable number of proactive inspections which, in many cases, lead to the recovery of the HSE's costs under the Fee For Intervention scheme where material breaches of health and safety legislation are identified. In 2019/20 there were 13,300 proactive inspections undertaken by the HSE, with a large proportion of these relating to the construction industry and asbestos.

When companies and individuals are prosecuted by the HSE, the latest statistics demonstrate that the HSE continues to maintain a high conviction rate (currently 95%). However, the HSE's data also suggests that the average level of fine imposed on companies and individuals following a successful health and safety conviction has fallen from £150,000 to £110,000 and the total fines imposed fell to £35.8 million in 2019/20 from £55.3 million in the previous year. The explanation for this decrease in the level of fines imposed is likely to be attributed, in part, to the reduced number of prosecutions being brought by the HSE. However, it is also plausible that the reduction in average fines could be due to defence teams and courts becoming more familiar with the application of the Sentencing Guideline which introduced a new approach to the sentencing of health and safety cases.

HSE statistics – disease highlights

Occupational lung diseases appear to remain relatively stable, with around 12,000 lung disease deaths each year estimated to be linked to past exposures at work. Of those, just shy of 2,500 are thought to be mesothelioma. The predicated figures for mesothelioma now suggest the peak was 2020, so it will be interesting to see if this is borne out in next year's figures. The incidences of occupational asthma, however, appear to be slightly on the rise with 174 new cases reported in the new publication, a rise of 42 on last year's figures.

The 'volume' industrial disease claims in more recent years, namely vibration and noise related deafness cases both continue to show a generally downward trend, albeit there was a slight upturn in deafness in 2019/2020. The HSE figures for deafness are dictated by IIDB benefit applications, showing 95 such claims made in the recent 12 months (up from 55 in 2018/2019), but still much reduced on the figures from 2009, with around 200 registrations at that point. Obviously those deafness claimants who are eligible to seek IIDB are in the minority, but the downward trend appears to hold true for the claims market generally.

Against a general downward trend over the past 20 years, musculoskeletal disorders have also shown a reduction this year, at 480,000 cases reported, down from 498,000 in 2018/9, but still generally up on the figure of 469,000 the previous year. The reason for this relatively small increase over the past two to three years is unclear and it will be interesting to see if there is any significant increase next year due to Covid and home-working. Manual-handling, awkward/tiring positions and keyboard or more generally repetitive actions remain the estimated most likely causes of musculoskeletal disorders. The construction and agricultural, forestry & fishing industries tend to be those more impacted by injuries of this type, perhaps underlining the generally heavier, manual nature of those sectors.

The area where there seems to be potential for a more significant upward trend in reporting is in relation to work-related stress, with figures slowly rising over the last five years, but with a significant upwards shift in the past 12 months. The new publication shows 828,000 workers suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety (new or longstanding) in 2019/2020 (significantly up from 602,000 in 2018/2019). Not only has there been a stark increase in reporting figures, but it is indicated that stress, depression or anxiety accounts for 51% of new and longstanding cases of work related ill health. This is a significant proportion, representing 17.9 million working days lost in 2019/2020. With the radical changes and new challenges at work as a result of the pandemic, whether that be a change to long term home working, overworked staff covering for those on furlough, key workers attending work during lockdown or frontline health workers dealing with the impact of the disease, it will be interesting to see how next year's figures in this regard are impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, during which stress and wellbeing have continued to remain concerns for employers and employees alike.

Conclusion

Whilst the UK consistently has one of the lowest standardised rates of both fatal injury and work-related ill health resulting in sick leave across the EU, and the continued fall in the number of fatalities in the latest publication is very welcome, the latest HSE statistics do paint a worrying picture. The increase in costs to the economy, the significant number of working days lost due to work-related ill health, the sharp rise in work-related ill health and injury cases and marked increase in work-related stress claims over the past 12 months are causes for concern which need to be closely monitored and controlled by employers to prevent a reversal of the previous long-term downward trends. Now is the time to revisit risk assessments, safety policies, processes and staff culture. Bearing in mind that these statistics conclude in March 2020, just prior to the Covid-19 national lockdown, then we can expect next year's figures to highlight an overall reduction in incidents given that many workplaces have been closed for much of this year, but perhaps a continuing increase in reported stress in particular, with the increase in employees working in less than ideal circumstances over the past year.